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ABSTRACT

A study examined the perceptions of newspaper editors as to how useful video cameras are in the newsroom. The original hypothesis was that reaction to introducing video cameras for newsroom use would meet with negative reaction. Subjects, 32 editors from Texas newspapers of over 10,000 circulation, were surveyed by mail. Results indicated an almost even split among the respondents as to whether a video camera would ever be useful to a newspaper and a similar split as to whether the editors would have any objections to a video camera. Two-thirds of the editors indicated that their newspaper provided tape recorders for reporters, which they considered a good backup to notes. Eighty-five percent of the respondents found video cameras intimidating, thus supporting the hypothesis. (Tables of data are included.) (NKA)

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Video Cameras in the Newsroom: Not Yet!

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Running Head: VIDEO CAMERAS

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Abstract

Video cameras may make a slow entry into the newspaper newsrooms. A study of Texas newspapers shows that about half of the managing editors surveyed are open to using video cameras for such things as descriptive assistance on feature stories and taping seminars for staff training.

However, the majority believed the video cameras are too expensive, too bulky and too intimidating for interviewing sources.

The video camera is compared to the tape recorder for purposes of this study. The major question asked is whether newspapers would have use for a new technology that accurately records interviews. Questionnaires were sent to all Texas newspapers above 10,000 in circulation. The response rate was 66 percent.

Chi square tests were run on the differences between the opinions of chain-owned and of independently owned newspaper editors and on the differences between editors of newspapers 40k and under and those above 40k. Neither test showed significance.

Video Cameras in the Newsroom: Not Yet!

The focus of this paper is to determine how well a new electronic recording system--video cameras--are perceived as useful for journalists in the newsrooms of newspapers. Others, including Smith (1984) and Mazur (1984) have studied the diffusion of electronic innovations in newsrooms. It should be noted that by the mid-1980s most American newsrooms had become electronic to a high degree (Bagdikian,1984).

The video camera can best be compared with tape recorders as electronic aids for reporters. When Morris (1973) outlined the problems journalists encounter in their daily work, he placed interviewing at the top of the list. He found that notetaking was the biggest problem in interviewing, but the use of tape recorders was only perceived as positive by about 20 per cent of those questioned. Adoption of innovative technology historically has come slowly in most fields, and newspaper reporters and editors have not been an exception.

Thus, the original hypothesis in this study was that reaction to introducing video cameras for newsroom use would

meet with a negative reaction. The reason was that technology is often perceived (Morris, Smith) as degrading or overrated.

Video cameras now often weigh under four pounds and in April of 1987 cost as little as $999. Only one person is needed for operation. Given these factors, the video cameras would seem ideal to serve several interviewing purposes, e.g., as a backup to interview notes; as a detailed record providing exact responses, including physical nuances, for feature writers; and as an excellent resource for interviews that might have complex ramifications, i.e., interviewing politicians on their records or hostile sources who might later threaten legal action. It was also perceived that using a camera would allow editorial writers, columnists and others access to a person without several writers having to contact the same source.

The question that guided the research was: will newspaper editorial workers find uses for a small camera that will accurately record interviews?

Method

The sample was limited to Texas because of economic factors, but because Texas is a large state with a significant number of newspapers it was believed that a sampling of Texas newspapers would be somewhat representative of

feelings among all editors toward another electronic innovation in the newsroom, this one aimed directly at news gathering rather than producing news as many of the innovations are aimed.

The 1986 Editor & Publisher Yearbook was used to come up with the names of all Texas newspapers with circulations over 10,000. That search yielded 48 newspapers. From each newspaper the executive editor was chosen to receive a questionnaire by mail. If there was no executive editor, the managing editor was chosen. On three smaller newspapers, the editor was the choice. Of the 48 editors, five were women.

Instrument

The instrument was designed to gather information that would provide an indication of the feelings editors had toward video cameras. The questions began with a yes or no response and if "no" was checked the respondent went to the next question. If "yes" was checked, the respondent then answered a short series of questions about the area being covered. Participants were asked if they believed having a video camera would be useful to a newspaper; if they had any objections to a reporter's use of a video camera; if their newspapers provided tape recorders for reporters; if they thought having a video

tape would be a good way to verify source complaints about misquotes; if there was a price at which purchase of video recorders would be attractive, and for positive and/or negative characteristics of both tape recorders and video recorders.

Open-ended questions asked for comments on supplementing note-taking with video cameras, the major drawbacks to their use and if the respondent perceived any major advantages to their use.

Additionally, questions were asked to determine the size of the newspaper, the number of days printed each week, how many reporters were employed and whether or not the newspaper was owned by a chain. There was a place to indicate whether a newspaper had a circulation of less than 10,000. Three newspaper editors checked that box, showing a discrepancy between their information and that in Editor & Publisher.

A first mailing went out in December 1986, and 24 of the 48 newspapers responded. A second mailing went out in February 1987, and an additional eight of the remaining 24 newspapers responded. The final total of responses was 32 of 48, or 66 per cent.

Twenty-six of the respondents were employed by chain-owned newspapers, while seven worked for independent publications. Twenty worked for papers with 40,000 circulation or less (nine for papers with 10,000-20,000 circulation and 11 for papers with 21,000-40,000 circulation) and 13 worked for papers with more than 40,000 circulation. Five were employed with papers with 41,000 to 60,000 circulation; one at a paper with 61,00 to 80,000 circulation and six at papers with circulations above 80,000.

Seven of the respondents were employed at papers published six days a week and 25 at papers publishing seven days a week.

Ten of the respondents worked at papers with more than 26 reporters in the newsroom; five at papers with 21-25 reporters; five at papers with 16-20 reporters; six at papers with 11-15 reporters; five at papers with 6-10 reporters, and two at papers with 5 or less reporters.

Findings

There was an almost even split among the respondents as to whether a video camera would ever be useful to a newspaper, with 48 percent answering yes and 52 percent answering no. Of the 48 percent who indicated the video

camera could be useful, barely half--56 percent of those--believed the camera would be useful in interviewing a person about a complex news story, 38 percent thought it would be useful for feature material, and only 19 percent indicated it would be useful whenever a source needed to be quoted at length very accurately. Respondents to this question supported five situations where they thought a video camera would be useful:

1. undercover work/sting operation
2. any situation where getting the right frame (photographic) is stronger than any conceivable notion of quality
3. descriptive assistance
4. taping seminars and other professional presentations for staff training
5. some spot news where speed is important

Again there was almost an even split among respondents as to whether they would have any objections to a video camera, with 42 percent indicating they would have objections and 52 percent indicating they would not. Of the 42 percent who indicated they had objections, 79 percent of those said it was because use of video cameras is irrelevant and time

consuming and 64 percent said it was because notes can be taken accurately without videotapes. Respondents to this question suggested six other reasons why they had objections:

1. tape recorders serve the same purpose with a lot less trouble
2. expensive to buy and operate
3. reporter might get lazy
4. reporter would be hampered by equipment/photographer needs to be taking stills
5. can inhibit the source
6. distracting

Two-thirds of the respondents indicated that their newspapers provided tape recorders for reporters. Ninety-one percent said tape recorders provide a good backup to notes, 76 percent said they insure accuracy, 73 percent said they are handy and 55 percent said they are easy to operate. On the other hand, 42 percent said tape recorders are time consuming.

As for characteristics of video recorders, 85 percent said they are intimidating; 70 percent said they are time-consuming; 70 percent said they are too expensive; 55 percent said they are too bulky and 36 percent said they are hard to operate. As for positive characteristics, 30 percent

respondents said the video camera would provide a good backup to notes and 27 percent said they would insure accuracy. Despite the fact that a videotape provides a record of an interview, 27 percent said the videotape would not be a good way to verify source complaints about misquotes.

Six percent of the respondents indicated they would buy one or two videocameras if the price fell to $500, and 24 percent indicated they would purchase from one to four cameras if the price dropped to $250. Seventy percent of the respondents left this question blank, apparently indicating they were uninterested in purchasing video cameras at any price.

As for the open-ended questions, 42 percent felt there was no relevance to the idea of reporters using video cameras as a part of their note-taking process and nine percent said the video recorders filled the same role as tape recorders. Fifteen percent of the respondents suggested they were relevant for critical interviews in an investigative story. Three percent suggested they might be worth experimenting with and three percent suggested they might be useful in describing sports action.

The respondents listed 16 different reasons they perceived as drawbacks to video recorders in response to an open-ended question in this category. Thirty percent said the recorders would be too intimidating to the source; 15 percent said they are too time consuming; 21 percent said they are too bulky; and 18 percent said the reporter would rely too much on the camera. Other reasons cited by more than one respondent were the reporter would be more concerned with the camera than with the interview; it would take two people for each interview or story; they would be too much trouble; it would be to expensive; they would be hard to operate and they could be legally risky.

The open-ended questions concerning advantages to the video recorders drew responses from 61 percent of the sample. Twenty-seven percent said the cameras could provide a complete irrefutable record of an event for legal purposes; 12 percent said they would ensure accuracy; 9 percent said they could provide a backup to notes; 6 percent said they could provide details of body language and voice inflection which could add to credibility; 3 percent said they could describe a scene and 3 percent said newspaper use of video recorders would aid the VCR industry.

Eighty-five percent of the respondents left blank the open-ended question on issues not addressed in the questionnaire. However, 9 percent of the respondents raised issues:

1. There is no shortcut to reporting with a notebook that is as handy or inexpensive.
2. They might someday replace still cameras.
3. They might create a chilling effect on the interviewee's willingness to talk.

Variables dealing with size of newspaper (Table One), and ownership of newspaper (Table Two), were subjected to Chi Square testing. There was no statistical difference found.

Table One

Size of newspaper and willingness to use video cameras

	Circulation <=40k	Circulation >40k
Usefulness	Number	Number
No	10	7
Yes	10	6

$X^2(1) = 0.047$ n.s.

Table Two

Ownership of newspaper and willingness to use video cameras

	Chain-Owned	Non-chained owned
Usefulness	Number	Number
No	3	14
Yes	4	12

$X^2(1) = 0.267$, n.s.

Limitations

Because no knowledge of use of video cameras in newspaper newsrooms is known by the authors, there was no direct questioning of a known user. Also, no demographic questions were asked about the age, education or length of newspaper experience of the respondents. Choosing Texas newspapers for purposes of limiting the survey allowed an initial look without a great expense but it would be better to take a broader look; other areas of the country might be more interested in video cameras for some reason or other. The size of the sample also limited statistical probing; a larger sample would be a wiser choice in further study. Finally, free-lance writers and magazine writers were not questioned; they both

might find video recorder uses in the longer stories they often write.

Summary

It was also interesting to note that the response to video cameras was not entirely negative; about half of the respondents indicated they would find one or more uses for them, especially if the price continues to drop. Perhaps the most interesting open-ended answer coded was that 10 respondents to the question on drawbacks to video cameras said they would intimidate sources. But no one mentioned that television cameras are used constantly by a competitive medium to record what sources say. The tape recorder is now being used to some extent in at least two out of three newspapers in Texas. Morris (1973) indicated that their use was not great during his study. Perhaps the video camera will make an appearance soon, too, and experience the same type of slow acceptance.

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